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TEACHING *A MIDSUMMER-NIGHT'S DREAM* TO PUPILS IN THE FIRST YEAR OF THE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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To a group of pupils beginning seventh-year work in the first class of the junior high school probably no other classic affords so rich a variety of educative experiences as does *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*. For this reason I have read the play with every class that has entered the Wisconsin High School. The first of these classes has been graduated; the sixth and last has just read the final scene. A retrospect of these six readings shows almost as little repetition in procedure on the instructor's part as on the pupils'; that is, the manipulation of the story has each year been determined by the individuality of the class as a group, just as each pupil's immediate part and consequent return have been determined by his personality and equipment. Beneath the conspicuous differences in the reactions of successive classes, however, certain fundamental steps are common. It is true that these steps must be taken in acquiring command of any story, but they sometimes seem especially difficult in the study of Shakespeare. They may be called approaching the story, finding it, telling it, and building on experience. Under these heads I shall recall some of our experiences in reading *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*.

I. APPROACHING THE STORY

Almost every idea that is given here comes from the pupils during our very informal, animated discussion. I am presenting, of course, very much less material than any group finds and contributes.

With the book unopened before us we look ahead to the succession of pleasures to come, as we go on reading Shakespeare's plays. Henceforward we are to travel through storyland hand in hand with

one of the greatest story-tellers of the world. His plays are for all kinds of people, educated and illiterate, old and young. We know it is possible for one story to interest persons who differ in age and experience, for any one of us now enjoys certain stories that he liked in quite a different way when he was a very young child. Moreover, we notice that older people find more in our favorite books than we do. As we have heard Shakespeare spoken of a great deal, we have in mind some questions concerning him which we hope to answer as we read his plays.

Some classes have a surprising variety of questions about the dramatist's ways of telling things, his ideas, his interests, his traits, and the kinds of stories that he tells. Most of them expect old-fashioned English, because he lived long ago, and some look for both poetry and prose. It will be no surprise to these pupils to be required to study this very play some years hence, for they know that, as a traveler sees an object in the landscape first from one side, then from another, and finally from a third or fourth, so does the maturing student view from different standpoints many objects that are worthy of study.

We next look at the title and guess about the story that is so labeled, for people always guess into a book through the title. In writing a story of our own we find the discovery of the best name for it a real triumph. Perhaps a great deal is hinted at in these words that Shakespeare chose. Guessing is very active here and accurate: outdoor action in summer setting; woods; confusion and contradiction, as in dreams; mystery; fairies and magic, because fairies have unusual powers on Midsummer Eve. Often this last fact has to be supplied by the teacher. If any of the class have seen the play, their knowledge stimulates the guessing by corroboration at the right moment.

After finishing the title we open the book to find a list headed either "Dramatis Personae" or "Characters Represented." Search for this list among the bewildering mass of editorial material is a new experience for the young reader. Many a pupil finds the play that he is looking for in the middle of the volume he holds. He has to be told that the preface, introduction, source list, essays, appendices, and notes form much of the apparatus belonging to that

mature type of study which he has recently mentioned, but that for our present purposes "the play's the thing" and nothing else need concern us, with the exception of the glossary. When we have found the place and have literally translated and properly pronounced *dramatis personae*, we check up our guesses with the clues offered by the list: outdoor setting and woods—right; mystery, magic, and fairies—right; confusion and contradiction—sure to result from the actions of three groups so different as these.

Our last step before plunging into the story turns attention to its printed appearance; acts, scenes, stage directions, and names of speakers make the page look "more like an outline or a market list than a story." This is part of the game, some of the new technique, and it therefore offers an attractive challenge to the reader; but footnotes crawling up the page almost to the exclusion of the legitimate text never fail to arouse the young pupil's resentment.

II. FINDING THE STORY

The twelve-year-old child who sets out to discover Shakespeare's dream story begins an adventure peculiarly suited to him. For he is a true Elizabethan, not wont to balance beforehand personal equipment against possible demands or to feel that the proper reaction to difficulty is diffidence. He likes to see things going on, and he insists on being a part of all he meets. Language he is quite at ease with, unless his sophisticated elders blur it with danger signals. Acquiring tongues has thus far been one of his chief occupations; and strange phraseology tantalizes him, for at any moment it may let slip a clue that opens up a new story. An old game in a new form, a new game in any form, challenges his ingenuity, and such a challenge no healthy child can ignore. For these reasons, trailing this story through the maze of magic, ignorance, and dreams demands no factitious lures from the master huntsman—only the assurance now and then that the game is just ahead.

Our pupils expect a story-teller to present them at the outset a picture of a situation in which they can see the results of past action or condition and the progress of present action, thought, or

Discussion by the class: "Theseus is going to marry Hippolyta after four days, and—How is that word that means marriage pronounced? Well, the nuptial day is the first day of the new month."

"*He* is impatient, but *she* isn't; anyway, she talks as if she weren't."

"He is the ruler, and of course his wedding is very important. He wants the people to have a good time, and he wants to entertain Hippolyta well too."

"Theseus needs amusement himself to make those four days pass quickly. He sends Philostrate to make arrangements because he is master of ceremonies. He always has charge of pageants, plays, and holiday celebrations."

"Theseus must have won Hippolyta by getting the prize in some tournament."

"Why does he say he did her injuries?"

"Maybe he conquered her champion, and she didn't like it at first but changed her mind."

"But Hippolyta was Queen of the Amazons. They were war-like women who fought like men. Maybe he fought *her* and won her by defeating her."

"Yes, that would fit all right."

"Women fight like that now in Russia."

"Yes, but they won't surrender; they'll die first."

"There is no confusion or magic so far."

"But these people all belong to just one group. There'll be plenty of chance in those revels that Philostrate is planning."

The reading continues from the entrance of Egeus with Hermia and her lovers to the exit of all but Hermia and Lysander. The listeners register each step in the progress of the story, and begin to build up some of the characters as the conversation goes on. Egeus is a conceited old fellow to think that only charms could turn his daughter's affections away from his chosen son-in-law. Evidently Hermia has courage, or she could not talk for herself to the duke, right in her father's presence. Demetrius is not worth much; probably he is marrying for money or position.

The work so far indicated is ordinarily covered in the first hour that is devoted to the play, a sixty-minute period. No outside assignment is made.

Our pupils are accustomed to enter the room as soon as the doors are opened. When we are reading a long story, they find several ways before the session begins to check progress of the preceding day. Some go to the board singly or in groups and list the facts of the story and the characters so far met. Others take turns telling the story, and still others take parts and read. By the time the whole class has convened, the work is well under way, and, if no question has to be settled, we continue the pursuit of the story. The pupils keep score of the new steps and make running comments in which the reader joins often enough to make effective connections that may be a little beyond the immediate view of the class. Easy passages they read silently, and then report their discoveries and ask questions.

At the close of the first scene the original guesses have been verified in two points: one charm is already at work—Helena's love for Demetrius, which amounts to an obsession—and coming confusion is made certain by her betrayal of her friends' flight.

Upon turning to the second scene we consider that in listening to these humble, ignorant workmen we follow a limited range of thought expressed in uncouth terms. We may find the men at work, but we have reason to expect them to be taking a holiday. The reader proceeds slowly, because every remark but the first will bring at least one question or comment from the class. She is careful to make every speaker quite distinct from the other characters. Of course Quince and Bottom give us the best opportunity to know them. Now and then, as I have indicated with the word "nuptial" in the first scene, the reader substitutes a known term for an unfamiliar printed word. The latter is by this means so quickly caught that it is used thenceforth with ease in reading or telling the story. This study-discussion runs somewhat as follows:

Bottom. You were best to call them generally, man by man, according to the scrip [written list].

"What does Bottom think he is saying?"

"Call them one by one—one at a time—individually."

Bottom. First, good Peter Quince, say what the play treats on, then read the names of the actors, and so grow to a point.

"Bottom is trying to be chairman; he interrupts Quince when Quince is doing all right."

"Lamentable comedy" brings an appreciative laugh, and "cruel death" proves that tragedy is meant. Somebody questions the suitability of such a play for wedding festivities. Bottom's next lines show that he is "bossy," and, long before the scene closes, the class votes him the champion braggart. When Quince resolutely takes control with "You can play no part but Pyramus," and then cleverly chokes the bully with flattery—"for Pyramus is a sweet-faced man; a proper man as one shall see in a summer's day; a most lovely, gentleman-like man: therefore you must play Pyramus"—they read eagerly to the end to see whether Bottom is silenced. Then they ask to act the scene at once, but that is not finding the story and must therefore be described later.

We teachers who take the responsibility of introducing one of Shakespeare's plays to students of any age cannot too often remind ourselves that the master dramatist never presumed to make an appeal to readers, but relied on the full interpretation of speech and action. Therefore, when reading from the cold, printed page, we must so lead our pupils that they get the drama-situation, no matter what impression the text makes on the eye. This responsibility is conspicuous in reading the second and third acts of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*.

In the first scene of the second act we learn the whole quarrel of Oberon and Titania from a short conversation between Puck and a fairy. We then immediately see the situation in action. While the royal fairies rail at each other in a wordy interview twice as long as the explanation that preceded it, they give us no new story facts; they show us in fascinating action a story situation already reported by others. When spectators view this play on the stage, they stand aside with Puck, as it were, and enjoy the quarrel, paying little attention to the words, for the purport of these they already know. To help the reading pupil to watch with equal understanding his mental stage the teacher acts as master of the revels somewhat as follows:

"If Oberon and Titania really are so excited about that changing, they *will* meet angrily. Just read a few lines to see what they say." Then she summarizes a page: "And so they continue, each blaming the other for bad weather and ill temper and selfishness. Now find line 138—

How long within this wood intend you stay?

and read to the end of the scene. See how many things you can find out."

The second scene of Act III is as long as Act I together with half of Act II. From the entrance of Hermia and Demetrius at line 40 it represents confusion worse confounded, but this confusion must be confined to the stage; the audience sees the action with understanding even clearer than Puck's or Oberon's. Again the teacher must point to the situation out of which grow the angry or pleading speeches—Hermia confused by Lysander's transformation; Helena bewildered by utter misunderstanding; all four lovers talking at cross-purposes until wrought up nearly to madness, and then led hither and thither by Puck until each in turn falls asleep thorough exhaustion. The characters can no more see their own situation than they can see Puck; the onlookers must see both. Only by so doing can they get the story and thus enjoy the fun of the magic dream. To produce the right effect, to keep the pupils in the attitude of the onlooker who is eagerly amused because he has the key to the situation which utterly bewilders the characters involved, the teacher must choose and summarize. She reads the first remarks of Hermia and Demetrius, and then says, "How long is this dispute? Who can find the end?" Somebody finds Hermia's exit, and then the class silently reads from that point to the entrance of Lysander and Helena, checking off the new steps in the story. Then we go through the long dispute among the four lovers, reading a bit here and there to assure ourselves how thoroughly our prophecy of magic and confusion is being fulfilled. Then we attentively read Oberon's rebuke, Puck's defense, the king's new orders, and his attendant's reply, after which the class reads silently Puck's game of tag with the lovers and continues to the close of the scene.

In the rest of the play—the first scene in Act II and Act III, both scenes of Act IV, and all of Act V—the problem is similar to that at the beginning—that is, to see the action and from it and the words to get the facts of the story. Therefore we read these portions as thoroughly as we do the first part of the play. The opening lines of the second act offer a charming opportunity to the children to form a picture, and to the teacher to learn what they see. Here we are in that wonderful wood "a league without the town," where neither the statutes of Athens nor the natural laws of the humdrum, physical world hold sway. We gaze about us wide-eyed while the teacher reads the fairy's first speech, giving full value to the sound and to the varying rhythm. For here the speaker is really a musician, whose responsibility is to build a "bridge from dreamland for his lay."

Over hill, over dale,
Thorough bush, thorough brier,
Over park, over pale,
Thorough flood, thorough fire,
I do wander everywhere,
Swifter than the moon's sphere;
And I serve the fairy queen,
To dew her orbs upon the green.
The cowslips tall her pensioners be;
In their gold coats spots you see;
These be rubies, fairy favors;
In those freckles live their savors:
I must go seek some dewdrops here
And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear.

"What did we see?"

"I saw the fairy flying in in a hurry and then settling down."

"She came in flying like a humming-bird and went from one flower to another."

"First she darted around among the flowers, and then she flew in circles, slower and slower, and then she lighted on a flower."

"How could you tell what she was doing?"

"By what she said and the way she said it."

I have thus far tried to show in general our procedure in the two processes of approaching and finding the story of this play.

It is evident that to this point the class has been very dependent upon the teacher and rightly so. Every pupil has been constantly alert and active according to his ability and has again and again come into the discussion, the reading, and the checking up. But on the teacher has rested the responsibility of directing the spotlight by means of which the pupils have found the story. Now, however, the story in the rough is theirs. They are eager to seize it, to pat and mold it, to turn it about in different lights and to breathe upon it and make it live. In this work the teacher's part becomes that of a sympathetic onlooker, ready with comments and suggestions.

III. TELLING THE STORY

This third stage in our study is begun whenever the class exclaims, "Now we can take parts and play this scene, can't we?" When reading *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* every class has expressed this wish at the end of the second scene, about the close of the third class period. On the fourth day, then, the pupils are eager to begin telling the story. They first read the scene through silently with two purposes—to recall all the points which they found there on the preceding day and to see plainly all the characters in action. A further purpose of the teacher is to have them see again the language of the text. Upon concluding this reading, every child considers the problem of placing in the classroom the scene that he has pictured, and after that he mentally assigns the parts to members of the class. As soon as a pupil has done these four things, he stands.

We try several ways of assigning parts, setting the stage—that is, the large, open space across the front of the room—grouping the players, and helping them to achieve satisfactory expression. A manager may be chosen by class or teacher to assign parts arbitrarily or to choose among volunteers. After everybody has had an opportunity to act more than one character and to help otherwise to develop scenes, the pupils like to assign parts by vote. In this case they allow no refusal. They feel that telling the story is emphatically a piece of co-operative work and that to express most effectively the best interpretation by the whole group there must

be no exemptions from their selective draft. A committee may arrange the stage setting, the actors may do it, or volunteered suggestions from the whole class may settle the problem. In the first attempts with any scene interruptions are frequent, and many a passage is tried again and again, often with several changes among the actors. As the work on a given unit approaches completion, however, there is little comment from the onlookers until the end. Pupils generally prefer to memorize their favorite scenes. They say that the story does not seem real when anyone who takes part has to use a book. Costumes and other accessories receive little consideration. Intelligent people can depend on their imaginations to picture these, the class thinks. Only Quince and his fellows need the lantern to present the moon.

Experience in acting the earlier scenes enables the class to find more keen enjoyment in both reading and playing the last act. They see the whole situation, but they take the standpoint of Theseus—tolerant, sympathetic, and humorous:

Theseus. I will hear that play;
For never anything can be amiss
When simpleness and duty tender it.

Hippolyta. He says they can do nothing in this kind.

Theseus. The kinder we, to give them thanks for nothing.
Our sport shall be to take what they mistake;
And what poor duty cannot do, noble respect
Takes it in might, not merit.

Would you desire lime and hair to speak better?

The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst
are no worse, if imagination amend them.

Every phase of this study of course presents new aspects in successive years, but the chances for gratifying experiences are better in this stage and in the last than in the preceding steps, where the pupils are more dependent on the teacher's guidance. When the class is telling the story, some members become as startlingly translated as Bottom himself. I recall certain cases. Fanny had

never been able to recite memorized passages or to read themes audibly, because she became panic-stricken at the sound of her own voice. But when a group of pupils were working out the second scene of the first act, and Bottom stood almost motionless and spoke in moderate tones, Fanny suddenly rose, quite self-forgetful. To her vision the scene was so clear that she demanded adequate expression of it.

"Bottom ought to wave his arms and stride around and talk very loud, because he is showing off," she said.

When another group went forward to try the scene, she was one of the directors, and the next day she volunteered to try a part. In this interpretation she experienced the pleasure that comes from giving form to an idea and seeing one's expression win the approval of one's fellows. Her improved poise was noticeable thenceforth.

Donald was a friendly child, but he loved to domineer over his associates. "Now, Bottom, quit that," a playmate said one day, and before the quick laugh that followed Donald subsided.

Richard was an almost inarticulate, solemn little gnome. His intelligent, observant eyes showed interest, but he lived apart from the class group in which his brother was quickly incorporated. Like Fanny, Richard demanded satisfactory presentation of the story, but his development was differently manifested. Gradually and quietly he took part among the prompters; then he took minor parts in stage groups. His progress was more noticeable, however, in the last stage of this work, which we are now to consider.

IV. BUILDING ON EXPERIENCE

What the immediate outcome of a given unit of study will be is a vital question for every class, a serious problem for every teacher. When the processes of discovering and mastering material have been completed, a normal impulse seeks opportunity to build upon that experience, to create something with the energy which has just been generated. Such opportunity the teacher must provide, and he must make sure that scope is given adequate to the range of ability in his class. His pupils unknowingly help him in his task. What they propose doing largely determines the activities which follow such study as has been described.

In the list of original work resulting from our study of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* the following items are representative. Scenes that Shakespeare omitted, like the rehearsal before Philostrate, the imagination of some readers so tantalizingly shadows forth that they write them in full. Perhaps the pupils vote these additions good enough to be acted. Original fairy tales occur to others. Of these some have settings similar to that of the play; others differ so widely as to show Christmas fairies at work in a snow-bound land. Stories and dramatic scenes are written, using Bottom's group; and others, presenting people of our own sort, are suggested by those comic types and situations.

Among cases of individual development, little Richard, who has already been mentioned, is a delightful example. After a few days' work on the play I saw him poring over the large score-card which recorded the progress of the class in learning the poems that were to be memorized before Christmas. The list gave the possible maximum, but, although Christmas was near, Richard's column showed an actual minimum of zero. A few more days passed, each giving him some opportunity for action or speech in the play and for constructive suggestion on the expression of others. He was talking in sentences and becoming mobile. One afternoon in the second week he came early and said, "I think I can say 'Old Ironsides' now." And Richard's column soon recorded his first success in completely memorizing a poem. Learning parts and responding in them to a rapid fire of cues was still beyond his power, for like Snug he was slow of study and of speech. But the stir of might had begun and evidence of it was registered where all could see.

The members of one class sought an amusing use of their energies when we were in the middle of the play. Noticing on the board references to Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, which the eighth-year class was reading, they said, "Oh, can't we read that story? We could play part of it. Lots of people play it for Christmas." We took counsel together and brought the following facts before the house. Nobody in class had read the whole story. Only eight had seen or heard parts of it. Our primary responsibility was our own work, and it therefore must not be neglected. However, there must be a way to do something with the story, for there is usually

a way to crowd among one's regular work extras that are worth while. To do it, however, requires determination, careful planning, patience, cheerfulness, a sense of humor, and a sense of responsibility. In this case the responsibility would necessarily be shouldered by the pupils, for the work would have to be done outside class. We could spare two class periods in order to get a view of the story as a whole. Then the pupils would have to take charge of it in groups, each of these preparing one scene or unit under the direction of an elected leader. Any group that should succeed in getting its part of the story into presentable form before the holiday recess might give it before the class. The teacher's active part in this enterprise consisted in giving the story by reading and summary and in listing eight scenes, from which the groups made their choice.

In the nine school days that intervened before the vacation the dramatist actors met several difficulties. Chief among these was finding a free hour in common. However, all the groups constructed their scenes in proper form, did some memorizing, and had at least one rehearsal. In all, their standard of measurement was Shakespeare's play; their efforts were guided not by what they had seen in moving pictures or on the stage but by what they had found necessary or good in their reading or acting of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*. Three groups carried their work far enough to be willing to appear before the class.

The attention accorded the performance attested interested approval, but the subsequent comments must have been a still better reward to the players for their really hard work.

"Each Scrooge," the audience said, "really was Scrooge. His face and motions and voice never changed out of character. It is hard to keep such a part."

"It must be still harder to act a ghost and make it seem ghostly. The voice is unnatural, the eyes look strange, and the movements are queer. And his jaw must drop too."

"Bob Cratchit's part was harder than it seemed. I thought he was good because he was acting all the time, although he had very little to say. He helped us to understand Scrooge better."

In these notes I have tried to present the four primary problems to be solved in studying *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* with young pupils to whom this is an introduction to Shakespeare. A question that is asked by teachers as well as laymen is, "Why do you begin with Shakespeare's own works? They are very hard even for adults to read. Why do you not take Lamb's *Tales* with these young children?" To this question there are two answers. The first one has been given by some pupil during our class discussion every year, as it was a few days ago.

"I was reading Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* the other day," said Keith, "when my father came into the library. He said, 'I'm glad to see you reading that book,' and I said, 'Oh, I don't like it. I'm just looking it over to see what's in it. I'd rather read Shakespeare, for that's interesting. There's so much more in it, and lots of exciting things are going on all the time. Lamb's stories leave all the interesting parts out.'"

Others who had read some of the *Tales* agreed, and one boy made a practical suggestion. "Probably Lamb meant all right," he said, "but he didn't half do the work. If he'd rewrite the book and put the whole of the stories in, it might be good reading."

The other answer is implied in that experience which is commonly cited as a reason for including Shakespeare's plays among the classics for school study—the fact that man has for three hundred years been enjoying these stories of human experience told in phraseology so alive that it has become incorporated in our daily speech. If these works are for this reason put into our course, should not the pupil have the opportunity to begin reading them when language offers him least difficulty and the discovery of a story affords him keenest delight?